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Statement of the Hon. Danny K. Davis Hearing on "Tension in the Tinderbox: Finding Fairness for Federal Firefighter Compensation"

August 12, 2005

Federal wildland firefighters are employed by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior in their land management agencies. The Forest Service manages approximately 200 million acres of land in 160 national forests and grasslands and Bureau of Land Management manages about 270 million acres, primarily in the western states.

The acreage burned by wildland fires has increased in the last few decades, after having declined throughout most of the previous century due to land management practices that emphasized fire suppression. For the years 2000-2003, the annual number of acres burned was almost 6000. In response to this increase, appropriations for firefighting activities have nearly tripled in the past five years, from about \$1 billion to over \$2.7 billion.

H.R. 408, the "Federal Wildland Firefighter Emergency Response Compensation Act of 2005," was introduced by Rep. Pombo on January 26, 2005 and has bipartisan support. If enacted, the bill would entitle wildland firefighters to so-called "portal-to-portal pay" – compensation for the entire 24-hour period of time the firefighter is engaged in officially ordered duties in responding to a fire or other emergency. Essentially, federal firefighters would be paid for every hour of the typical two-week tour, 16 hours per day at the regular rate and 8 at the overtime rate.

Current practice is to pay federal firefighters only for the usual 12 to 16 hour shift, even though they generally remain at base camps in the vicinity of the fire while sleeping and eating. Advocates for federal firefighters maintain that nearly every paid, professional firefighter in the United States is paid for a 24 hour shift, and that the Forest Service pays contractors and cooperating state and local fire personnel on that basis. This disparity could lead to low morale and high turnover which might be addressed by H.R. 408.

Fairness indicates we should seriously consider the merits of H.R. 408. However, we must also consider the budgetary impact this bill could have, as the likely effect of the pay provisions in the bill would be to increase weekly pay for firefighters by up to 90 percent while they are actively fighting fires.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.